

# Book Complements Pentagon Papers

By Chalmers M. Roberts

When the shattering events of Dallas transferred the problem of Vietnam to a new President, Lyndon B. Johnson did not stop to ask whether an American role in Indochina made any sense. He plunged forward in the firm conviction that it did because he saw it as a part of the larger postwar history he knew so intimately.

This is the dominant fact that emerges from the initial chapter about the war in the former President's memoirs. What The Washington Post is printing are carefully chosen excerpts from the memoirs, chosen to give the heart of Johnson's views without all the detail the big book provides.

One immediate question is how his version compares with that in the Pentagon Papers published last summer. The answer is that, in this initial chapter covering 1963-64, the two versions are not so much in conflict as they are complementary. This is the Presidential overview and it should be read as such.

Many of those whose views were so vital to the Pentagon Papers do not even appear in the Johnson account and there is only a passing reference or two to the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the thoughts of its members. One point of similarity: the CIA in both cases appeared to be the most skeptical of success.

The former President writes in the prose designed for history; there is none of his famous informality, of the barnyard anecdote, even of the informal phrasing of his post-retirement television interviews with Walter Cronkite. Some points are skipped over; others omit much of the story the Pentagon Papers told.

Mr. Johnson never made any secret that he felt the coup against Ngo Dinh Diem was a mistake and he says so again. But he totally omits the detailed account of American responsibility in that coup. He limits himself to rapping the famous cable of Roger Hillsman on Aug. 24, 1963, as "a crucial decision" that launched two years of chaos in Vietnam.

The Pentagon Papers

show that President Johnson defined "neutralization" of Vietnam as "a Communist takeover" and that he instructed Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge that "your mission is precisely for the purpose of knocking down the idea of neutralization wherever it rears its ugly head . . ." In this chapter of the Johnson memoirs, however, the ex-President is content to declare that he believed "most thinking people" recognized that French President de Gaulle's "neutralization" formula would have meant "swift Communization" in Indochina.

At another point Mr. Johnson refers to a recommendation by Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara to prepare for "certain border control actions." The Pentagon Papers disclosed that that term really meant "covert Vietnamese operations into Laos."

The Pentagon Papers created a major row in Canada with the disclosures of American use of a Canadian diplomat, J. Blair Seaborn. Mr. Johnson states that Seaborn "presented our views not as an advocate but as a dispassionate intermediary."

The Pentagon Papers, as The New York Times account presented it, had Seaborn conveying an "obvious threat." The point remains uncertain.

Finally, Mr. Johnson in this chapter once again vents his disdain for such sunshine patriots as Sen. J. William Fulbright, as he saw them. He is defensive as he has been before about his 1964 campaign statement that American boys should not do the fighting that Asian boys should do for themselves. He insists that the voters that year "knew what they were voting for," that they were not, in effect, lied to by a man who many came to believe was secretly planning to escalate the war while running as a peace candidate against Barry Goldwater.

All such points are fragments of history. None is likely to sway minds already made up one way or the other about the initial Johnson role in the war. Mr. Johnson now has had his say and the historians will have to sort it all out once the nation reaches the point where a dispassionate view becomes possible.

See 4.01.1 New York Times

See 4.01.2 Vantage Point